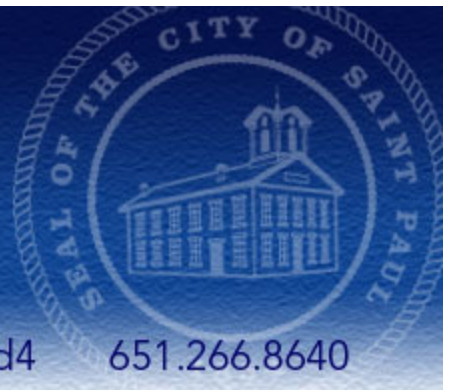


WARD NEWS

Ward 4 - Councilmember Stark

www.stpaul.gov/ward4

651.266.8640



Saint Paul City Council's Ward 4 E-Newsletter Volume 8, December 2008

What's inside:

- 2009 Budget
- Transportation Update
- Vacant Housing Update
- Rock-Tenn Update
- Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow. Then shovel.
- Plastic Bags

2009 Budget

We have entered into an uncertain and gloomy period with regard to the City's 2008 and 2009 budgets. Earlier this year, the state certified that St. Paul would receive about \$56.8 million in Local Government Aid (LGA) in 2008 in two installments, with the latter payment due at the end of December. Any day now the Governor is likely to announce an "unallotment" of LGA funds. Unallotment will mean that the state would decrease the amount that they previously promised. An unallotment would mean a devastating depletion of the City's reserve fund balance, to the point where our AAA credit rating would be seriously at risk, which would likely make it more expensive for us to borrow money and sell bonds. Given the State's projected 2009-2010 budget hole, we must also assume a significantly lower LGA contribution for 2009 and 2010 than we had previously expected. In the short-term, Mayor Coleman has asked all departments to develop a 20% budget reduction scenario for 2009.

These are difficult economic times all around, and the City of St. Paul will have to tighten its belt like everyone else. But much of the "fat" in City government has already been cut in years past, and there is a good chance that these reductions in LGA will mean reductions in service and deferring needed investments in infrastructure, even while we are increasing the property tax levy in 2009. Higher property taxes for less service is a very unattractive scenario for everyone, but that is likely the reality of St. Paul's 2009 Budget due to the potential "unallotment."

Transportation Update

The Light Rail Project is moving ahead on schedule, with utility work planned to begin in Downtown St. Paul by District Energy in the fall of 2009. The project should be allowed to enter Final Design in the spring of 2009. The anticipated federal stimulus package could mean an acceleration of other transitway projects in the region, and a great deal of discussion is underway about a high speed rail connection between St. Paul and Chicago.

On a related note, Metro Transit is projecting a huge budget hole for transit operations for the next biennium, which means the possibility of further service reductions and/or fare increases looms. At a time when transit ridership continues to grow and when the service is needed more than ever, I encourage everyone to let the state legislature and the Met Council know how important transit service is to our community.

Vacant Houses & Foreclosure in Ward 4

In Ward 4 at the end of November, there were 142 vacant houses, compared to the 86 vacant in November 2007. Sherburne Avenue, in particular, is seeing the effects – with 16 vacant houses. I am working with the Planning and

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Economic Development Department and local community organizations to identify strategies to turn these properties around and help to stabilize blocks and neighborhoods.

We all owe a "thank you" to Cheryl Gfrerer, the Chair of the Hamline Midway Coalition Board, Coalition staff, and many neighborhood volunteers for their work to clean up the Sherburne vacant properties – reducing their negative effects on the surrounding neighbors. I was fortunate to join one of the neighborhood clean-ups in my neighborhood, and it was amazing to see what a relatively small group of people could accomplish in a morning's time. This kind of commitment to our neighborhoods on the part of neighbors is exactly what will help us weather the foreclosure/vacant housing storm.

Finally, though I know I've referenced this before, I want to make sure that as many people as possible know about resources available for dealing with foreclosure. The City's Mortgage Foreclosure Prevention Program can be found here (along with information about the City's home loan products for first-time home buyers.)

(<http://www.municode.com/Resources/gateway.asp?pid=10061&sid=23>)

The MN Home Ownership Center also has foreclosure prevention services available for both homeowners and renters (<http://www.hocmn.org/ForeclosurePrevention.cfm>). Please pass this information on to neighbors and friends.

Rock-Tenn Update

On November 19, the City Council had the privilege of unanimously accepting the report of the St Paul Port Authority and the added recommendations of the Rock-Tenn Community Advisory Panel (which were echoed by District Councils). The recommendations encourage the St. Paul Port Authority to pursue anaerobic digestion and the creation of biogas as a solution to Rock-Tenn's thermal energy needs. Much work remains to be done to make this option a reality, but many thanks are also due to the members of the RCAP, the Port Authority, Rock-Tenn, the United Steelworkers and other unions involved, the St. Anthony Park Community Council (and Nina Axelson in particular), and Neighbors Against the Burner for their tireless work over two years to come to this recommendation. If, as we all hope, this option proves feasible and can help stabilize Rock-Tenn's energy costs for years to come, this process and the work of those involved will prove to be a great model of people coming together to save around 475 green/union jobs and to retain the state's largest recycled paper mill. Thank you also to State Senator Ellen Anderson for her role in crafting and championing the legislation that enabled this process.

Let it Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow -- Then Shovel

My office has partnered with St. Paul Smart-Trips (www.smart-trips.org) and Councilmembers Helgen and Lantry to provide doorhangers via district council offices that neighbors can use to remind each other to shovel their walks. The doorhangers will be available soon from all Ward 4 district councils. I've made this a priority because clear sidewalks and corners are a necessity for the elderly, disabled, transit-users, dog-walkers, and many others.

The City of Saint Paul requires property owners bordering public sidewalks to shovel sidewalks within 24 hours of a snowfall. The full width of the sidewalk needs to be cleared, and if the property is a corner lot, the sidewalk corners and curb ramps also need to be cleared. If the sidewalk isn't cleared and a complaint is called in, residents will be noticed by the City and ultimately charged to have the City shovel. Elderly and disabled homeowners, or others who are unable to shovel their own walks should contact the Senior Chore Service for assistance in finding volunteers to help shovel (call 651-649-5984). If the friendly reminder approach doesn't work, you can issue a complaint by calling the City's information and complaint line at 651-266-8989.

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Plastic Bags

As you might have read, I recently proposed including in St. Paul's Legislative Agenda for 2009 asking the state legislature to grant the City permission to create a new fee on the use of disposable, non-compostable plastic bags at retail establishments. The effort failed on a 3-3 vote, but I will continue to pursue this issue with my colleagues and the legislature. I had heard from several constituents over the course of the year who want to reduce the use of plastic bags, and had been following similar legislation recently either approved or in discussion in Seattle, New York, San Francisco and elsewhere. The idea behind the fee is simple – to reduce the use of disposable plastic bags by creating an economic disincentive at the point of sale. I raised the idea both because I believe it is the right thing to do for the environment and because I have become increasingly fed up with litter on our City streets, and plastic bags are a primary culprit.

As always, I welcome your thoughts and perspectives.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Stark", written in a cursive style.